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Rethinking road plans

New court to give funding deal close scrutiny

By Brad Rollins
Staff Reporter

San Marcos — A day after Democrats notched a near sweep of county offices, County Judge-elect Elizabeth Sumter said she will ask the commissioners court to reconsider an agreement with the state to pay for most of a \$152.9 million road improvement package.

Under the deal inked in August, the county will front the cost of widening three state highways, including Ranch Road 12 and Texas 21, and building a short segment of the San Marcos loop. The state will reimburse the county up to \$133.1 million over two decades with yearly payments based on how many cars use each of the new or expanded roads.

The court, including Commissioner Debbie Gonzales Ingalsbe, the current court's lone Democrat, unanimously approved the deal in August. The deal's future is now in doubt with Sumter saying on Wednesday she will move to re-examine the arrangement after taking office in January.

"We're going to revisit that road package completely and see whether the new court thinks it's a good idea," said Sumter, who signaled she would oppose the package herself.

"I don't believe we should allow the state to use the county as a credit card. The state should be responsible for state roads and the county should be responsible for county roads."

Residents should not assume the new court is bent on scrapping the package, said Pct. 2 Commissioner-elect Jeff Barton, a Democrat tapped to replace Susie Carter.

"I don't think the court will just set it aside out of hand. ...From my end, transportation is a critical priority and there's no doubt we need to get roads built. I don't think anyone should be too nervous that we're going to discard (the deal) automatically," Barton said.

Commissioner-elect Karen Ford, who beat Russ Molenaar in Pct. 4, could not be reached for comment.

A parade of community leaders and residents turned out in August to urge the court's approval of the package, which it did in a rare 5-0 vote. Using \$5 million from a voter-approved 2001 bond package, engineering and design on several of the projects has since then been underway.

Commissioners however deferred how to come up with the tens of millions the county needs to front the roads' costs. Sumter said she will insist on an election to ask residents' approval to sell general obligation bonds, a position Ingalsbe has already taken.

"If we do decide to borrow this kind of money to pay for the state's responsibilities, I believe strongly that we should ask the people if they want it," Sumter said.

Commissioner Will Conley, soon to be the court's only Republican, said he is "taking a wait-and-see mentality."

"The people of Hays County want their state roads to be improved and they understand the consequences of not getting it done. ...There are a lot of projects on the table right now that are going to have to be addressed immediately upon taking office and we'll see what they do with it," Conley said.

The packages include widening to five lanes a 10.3-mile stretch of Ranch Road 12 between San Marcos and Wimberley and building a 3.5-mile segment of the loop between Interstate 35 and Texas 123 along McCarty Lane. A six-mile segment of Farm-to-Market Road 1626 is also slated for widening to five lanes. All told, the improvements are projected to cost \$152.9 million.

As part of a separate but related agreement, the state will match the county for up to \$8 million on safety improvements to Texas 21.



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